

Commentary: The Postmodern Dilemma: The Relationship Between Word and Image

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The questions Professor Kupffer's article raise concerning the relationship between image and the word, have been, by and large, ignored in modern aesthetic thought. An artificial separation of these two media of expression had been, since the Renaissance, characteristic of western philosophical thought. Leonardo, Cellini and Michaelangelo all wrote treatises in order to place art on the same footing as the literati's words. A quick scan of the philosophical record suggests that the deep schism persists between the image and the word which manifests itself as a bifurcation between rationality and irrationality. To name but a few of the more prominent proponents of this position; Schiller's distinction between sensuousness and the rational (the word being rational, art being sensual), Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Freud's pleasure principle and reality principle, Caudwell's genotype and nature, Jung's archetype and society, Fromm's collective art and marketing orientation, Marcuse's eros and civilization, and Sorokin's characterization of sensate and ideational cultural types. We might end the list with an often quoted philosopher of art, Susan Langer, who preserves a strict division between word and image by claiming art to be non-discursive, while the medium of writing is, of course, discursive. Indeed, it appears that structuralism, by definition, rests on the binary oppositions that have emerged throughout western thought.

As art educators who are living in a postmodern world, we should give pause in the face of Professor Kupffer's thesis as to the possible limits of interpretation. It is quite clear from his exposition that art does not reflect reality, rather it partakes in its construction. As art educators, we are involved in the creation of Bildung, a term which refers to an individual's possession of a rich cultural understanding as developed through the "story" which we as teachers expose to our students. What sort of art we choose to expose our students to, what values we articulate during its interpretation, and what definitions of art we promote, socially constructs who we are. It is the "story" we weave in our classrooms. It is obvious that such a task is highly political, can be ideologically lucid, and can shed light on the hidden interests each one of us possess.

In our postmodern period the name of Nietzsche begins to loom large. In the German context such internationally known philosophers as Peter Sloterdijk and Peter Burger have brought home Nietzsche's famous insight: the only truth is there is no truth.^{30,31} Professor Kupffer's position echoes this distinct postmodern dilemma. If there is no truth as socially constructed, we must face the awesome responsibility that any idealistic absolutes must be abandoned and replaced with the more sobering realization that both language and image, together, help shape our reality. Reality becomes a contested battleground amongst dominant power groups. One does not need to dig very deeply to realize that gender, color, race, age and physical ability are but a few of the deciding factors which differentiate our students from one another into stratified layers of achievement and excellence. To this Professor Kupffer's queries raise the important question of democracy.

As art educators, what is our social responsibility when promoting an image of the world, especially today when we are living in the shadow of the nuclear bomb?

Lastly, the issue between word and image is central to the postmodern debate. Modern art had its roots in 'humanism.' As art educators, we all have been told the 'story' that the individual - the great artist of Western tradition, who has developed a unique style should be promoted in our school programs. Indeed this is the position advocated by NAEA's insistence on excellence as recently articulated by Ralph Smith.³² This character type manifests itself through such key concepts as creativity, originality, and self-expression. This individual presupposed by humanism is an autonomous being, possessed of self-knowledge and an irreducible core of humanity, a human essence which strives over history progressively to perfect and realize itself. Perhaps best articulated through a Hegelian aesthetic we have come to know this story as "progress" in art, with the artist in full search of the truth and authenticity. Recent postmodern criticism has tried to bury this story - to deconstruct its central core of beliefs. Most notably, such theoreticians as Derrida, Baudrillard and the late Foucault, have presented an anti-humanism that is extremely sobering when compared to the elation and the promises of modernism, such as progress, reason, objectivity.^{33,34,35} Derrida coined the term "logocentrism" as the tendency of western metaphysics to refer to all questions of the meaning of "representations" - novels, films, photographs, paintings and so on - to a singular founding presence which is imaged as being behind them, whether it be the author, reality, history, zeitgeist, or structure. This metaphysics of presence founded on the privileging

of speech over writing and, I would argue, word over image, claims that the words I speak are authentic and that, through dialogue, any possible misunderstandings or doubts as to my intentions may be cleared up. Once committed to writing, my words become subject to the interpretation of the reader who cannot gain the certainty of my intention and hence misinterpretations are liable to occur. The same reasoning applies to art. The artist's words become most influential when the art's true meaning is to be ascertained. Derrida's notion of logocentrism puts into question a privileged origin and the view of 'humanism' that wo/man is in full spontaneous possession of self expression, because the illusion of language is precisely in that a meaning that is present, preconstructed in full integrity, behind a unit of language or any other representational form is not possible. In whatever form, as Professor Kupffer's thesis touched upon, meaning is only produced within a complex play of differential relationships, in what Derrida refers to as difference. The final course of meaning upon a point of original certainty is endlessly deferred. This again puts doubt on a critic's or a teacher's secure explanation and evaluation of an artwork. For art educators this means that we, as beholders and interpreters of art in dialogue with our students, must face the uncomfortable and precarious position of being the producers of meaning rather than being consumers of it. We learn more or as much about ourselves than about the art we interpret. How are we to avoid being experts when it comes to art appreciation?

All this leads me to a final brief remark on the recognition that conceptual art has been, and in some circles continues to be, an artform that breaks down the barriers between word and image. This is

particularly true of information art such as documentation. As art educators working within the post-modern period, we must turn towards the media of mass arts where the distinction between word and image was broken down a long time ago, rather than continue to privilege such representational humanistic studio orientations as easel painting and sculpture. The whole realm of semiotic theory awaits us. Professor Kupffer's discussion makes us more aware of the naive divisions which have up-held humanism, culminating in the most recent slogan

promoting the major differences between left and right brain and ignoring the central issue--what sort of society are we promulgating through the representational imaginings of both word and image? From such a question it becomes readily apparent that art education is far-removed from critical political questions assuring its dormancy through the reliance on expert art critics, museum educators and the humanist line of great male artists who continue to bring forth the 'good news' (the truth) as registered in the Bible of Art History.

Footnotes

- 1 Originally published as "Interpretation moderner Bildwerke--was lasst sich Umgang mit Kunst Uberhaupt verbalisieren?" Universitas, #433 (Januar 1987). pp.65-73. The translator would like to thank Sybille Anselm for her help with the more difficult passages in the text and her willingness and patience to examine the final translation.
- 2 Prof. Dr. Heinrich Kupffer was professor of education from 1971-1986 at the PH in Kiel. His areas of specialization are fundamental questions concerning education and aesthetics, philosophy of science and educational sociology. Since 1986 he has been retired and lives as an author in Berlin.
- 3 The location of the "real" message forms the substance of Kupffer's analysis.
- 4 Wandelnden Kulture has been translated as 'wandering culture.' The verb wandeln refers to the act of strolling in the woods, a common Germanic pastime. Heidegger had popularized the term Holtzweg, or path through the woods, as a way to characterize existence as being both lost and found; we are conscious of the path we have taken through the woods (lived life), yet each step we take further into an abyss, an uncharted jungle since we do not know what lies ahead. Each step, taken in the present towards some clearing we hope to find ahead, has already been influenced by our previous walks. Kupffer is alluding to the view that all history is characterized by such a paradox. The future is never pre-determined, a path already paved, rather it unfolds as we look in the past and reinterpret it from our current historical moment. Current art movements likewise must be interpreted against the broader historical discourse on art if they are to take on meaning. Examining each tree makes us blind to the forest; examining the entire forest makes us blind to the individuality of each tree. Such hermeneutic process can best be described as "wandering" since its course is always open to twists and turns depending upon the politics of the interpretations. The praxis of history becomes doubled; it consists of both the current artistic practice and the interpretation of that practice. Such action may change the

direction of the projected path. Today, feminist praxis, for example, has introduced new twists and turns as the critique of patriarchy forces is to re-evaluate history. Kupffer's claim that the situation regarding interpretation has become more difficult rather than easier since all interpretations harbour overt and covert political and ethical interests as Habermas (1966) has argued. All of those who offer a comprehensive interpretation must act as if they were the 'last' historians. The backward glance by the historian always requires freezing the frame of history, which is an illusionary act. Should a particular interpretation become the standard or classical explanation it must be misinterpreted, revised and updated by future generations. Deviations must occur because of changed historical circumstances. Kupffer cautions the spectator-reader to avoid any naive notions of truth and falsehood which still belong to positivist aesthetic viewpoints. Art and its interpretation, being ideological and therefore ethical and political in their intent, contribute to a culture's 'wanderings.'

5 Glozer, L.: Westkunst. Koln 1981, S.309.

6 Schmalenbach, W.: Bilder des 20 Jahrhunderts. Munchen 1986, S.228.

7 Fraenger, W.: Von Bosch bis Beckmann. Koln 1985, S.310.

8 By this Kupffer is alluding to Heidegger's question whether it is language that commands us or we who command language. By analogy the paradox has been extended to 'visual' language.

9 Kupffer is satirically equating the sighting of a UFO with artworks which, to many people, seem alien, impossible to comprehend. In order to ease their anxiety some attempts at explanation must be found.

10 Vgl. Adorno, T.W. Aesthetische Theorie. Frankfurt, 1963; Sontag, S.: Kunst and Anti-Kunst, Frankfurt, 1982.

11 Vgl. Busch W./Beyroth, W. (Hrsg.): "Kunststheorie und Kuntsge-
schichte des 19." Jarhunderts I. Stuttgart 1982, S.10.

12 Eisler, H.: Musik and Politik. Leipzig 1985, S.128. Kupffer is referring to positivist Marxist aestheticians who, since Zhadov and Plekanov, have claimed realist art to represent 'reality' as it truly is. Even an aesthetician of the magnitude of Lukacs claimed that realism was far superior to expressionism because it did not distort existence but presented it as it was.

13 Vgl. Koch-Hillebrecht, M.: Die Moderne Kunst. Koln, 1983.

14 Pochat, G.: Der Symbolbegriff in der Asthetik/und Kuntswissen-
schaft. Koln, 1972, S.201.

15 See Foucault, M.: This is Not a Pipe. University of California Press, 1982. Foucault provides an interesting discussion regarding the interplay between text and artwork in the works of Rene Magritte. In a more satirical fashion, this same topic is treated by Tom Wolfe: The Painted Word, New York: Bantam Books, 1975.

- 16 Kupffer is referring to the well known philosophical discussion regarding the claims of artists about their works. This 'intentionalist fallacy' was made famous by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy." The Verbal Icon. University of Kentucky Press 1954, pp.3-18.
- 17 This is a rather difficult passage. Kupffer is attempting to distinguish interpretations that are merely incremental. They build on and add to previous insights of predecessors but stay within the given paradigm. Other interpretations may be claimed to be 'misinterpretations.' They radically change the way we have 'read' artworks in the past.
- 18 Vgl. Nash, S./Merkert, J. (Hrsg.); Nuam Gabo. Sechzig Jahre Konstruktivismus. Munchen 1986.
- 19 Kupffer is referring to the generation of artists who might be called loosely the avant-garde at the fin de siecle.
- 20 Literally translated as "picture-newspaper." The Bild-Zeitung is a German newspaper, perceived to have an unsophisticated readership. The stories are consistently sensationalist and there are many bawdy pictures. (Sybille Anselm)
- 21 Vgl. Wittgenstein, L.: Vorlesungen und Gespräche über Aesthetic, Psychologie und Religion. Gotten 1971.
- 22 Kupffer is alluding to the problem of origins. This issue has become extremely problematic in the postmodern world. The current arguments in science revolve around the presuppositions of neo-Darwinism which claim punctuated evolution. In the arts this same argument translates as purposeful 'misinterpretation.' We can continually 'trace' back any artwork into a bottomless abyss. There is no 'ground' we can stand on to positivistically claim we have found the origins of any phenomenon.
See Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, Oxford Press, 1973, and Jacques Derrida. Of Grammatology. Trans. G. Spivak, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- 23 Kupffer means that we recognize that the artwork is part of the socially constructed reality and that we do not harbour any pretense that it presents an objective truth.
- 24 Kupffer is alluding to Gadamerian hermeneutics and to the potential transformative nature of art. During the process of interpretation, an artwork may become the vehicle through which a person's entire consciousness might be transformed as new insights regarding society are internalized. See H. Gadamer, Truth and Method. Sheed and Ward, 1975 and note 4.
- 25 Kupffer uses the old German word Gefilde to refer to the sense of hearth. This has allusions to the bourgeois household where art is primarily decoration. (Sybille Anselm)
- 26 Benjamin, W.: Das Kunstwerk in Zeitalter seiner Technischen Repro-

duzierbarkeit. Frankfurt 1977, S.15. In this famous work, translated as The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Illuminations, Ed. H. Aredt, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, Benjamin discusses the loss of the 'aura' in an age where all art is reproducible through the modern means of technological reproduction.

- 27 Kupffer is referring to the reliance on experts which a guided tour perpetuates. Rather than grappling with their own interpretations, gallery visitors accept the official word as gospel thus furthering the myth that an objective and unbiased interpretation is being presented.
- 28 Feyerabend, P.: Wider den Methodenzwang. Frankfurt 1976, S.209 ff.
- 29 Kupffer is referring to the blind spots of our own culture. Such understandings have 'expired' because they are no longer in the public eye. Art can revive and shed light on such areas. There is never a shortage of artists who remind us of the societal palliatives from the negligence of our aged to the abuse of our pets.
- 30 Sloterdijk, Peter. Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft. Band I & II. Shurkamp Verlag: Frankfurt an Main. 1983.
- 31 Burger, P. Theory of the Avant-Garde. Trans. M. Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- 32 Smith, R. Excellence in Art Education. National Art Education Association, 1986.
- 33 Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. Trans. G. Spivak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- 34 Baudrillard, J. The Mirror of Production. Trans. Mark Poster. Telos Oress: St. Louis, 1975.
- 35 Foucault, M. Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews. Trans. D. Bouchard and S. Simon. Cornell University Press, 1977.

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